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ICONS | ICONS

A New Way of Seeing Artist Thomas Cole

More international and political, less a father of the Hudson River School



Thomas Cole's 'The Course of Empire: Destruction' (1836). PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY/OPPENHEIMER EDITIONS

By Alexandra Wolfe

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The curators of a new Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition might have titled it, “Everything You Never Knew About Thomas Cole.”

Cole is known as the father of the Hudson River School, a group of American artists who painted dramatic outdoor panoramas. But “Thomas Cole’s Journey: Atlantic Crossings” posits an artist with an international background and interests—and one who had political beliefs very different from the other painters in the group, such as Frederic E. Church.

The name of the Hudson River School itself was originally pejorative. “Put about by younger artists and critics who found the work of Cole and his followers old-fashioned, this term, now a badge of honor, was originally intended to mock their provincialism,” write co-curators Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer in the exhibition catalog.

The Cole in this exhibition—which runs in New York from Jan. 30 to May 13 and celebrates the 200th anniversary of his first Atlantic crossing from England—comes across as an artist inspired as much by his visits to England and the European continent as by the Catskill Mountains north of New York City.

The show will have six chronological sections, starting with Cole’s youth in northern England. Born in 1801, he grew up in the Lancashire town where workers known as Luddites protested the rise of factories by smashing machinery. Cole himself worked at a calico-print factory as a teenager. Dr. Kornhauser, a curator of American paintings and sculpture at the Met, says that these experiences helped to shape Cole’s opposition to technological progress and eventually drew him to paint scenes of nature. After his father lost his job in England, his family moved to America in 1818 to find work.

Cole, who had no formal art training, learned about his craft from a portrait painter—although he first drew trees. He visited the Catskills in 1825. “He was the first artist to take on the subject



Thomas Cole's 'View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow.' PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

of pure wilderness,” Dr. Kornhauser says. Cole also painted landscapes rooted in American literature. James Fenimore Cooper’s 1826 novel, “The Last of the Mohicans,” inspired an 1827 painting, on view in the exhibition’s second section and showing Cora, the daughter of a British colonel, kneeling before Tamenund, a wise Native American chief, on a mountain precipice.

By 1829, Cole had achieved enough success to be able to return to Europe. He visited English Romantic artist John Constable in London and admired the way that he painted dramatic cloud formations in his plein-air, or on-site, cloud studies. The third section includes Constable’s works.

Then Cole headed for Italy, where he used the plein-air technique himself, as seen in the fourth section, “Italy: The Grand Tour.” There, Cole studied Titian and other earlier masters and created studies of Italian ruins on view in the exhibition, such as his 1832 “Campagna di Roma,” a close-up depiction of an aqueduct, with mountains in the background.

In France and Italy, according to the curators, Cole became fascinated by how great civilizations rose and fell and felt that industry would be responsible for the decline of his own. Increasingly, “Cole foresaw inevitable doom for the republic, as with Rome before it,” Dr. Barringer, an art history professor at Yale University, writes in the catalog.

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On that trip, from 1829 to 1831, Cole conceptualized one of his best-known series of paintings, “The Course of Empire.” The series, which he began in 1834, offers five depictions of human civilization, from idealized nature-steeped scenes to the rise of empire and subsequent

decay. The exhibition includes all five paintings.

That same year, Cole became an American citizen, despite his dislike of President Andrew Jackson, who backed imperial and commercial expansion. After Jackson was elected, Cole wrote in his journal, “It appears to me that the moral principle of the nation is much lower than formerly...it is with sorrow that I anticipated the downfall of pure republican government—its destruction will be a death blow to Freedom.”

The fifth section, “Consummation,” features Cole’s seminal work, popularly known as “The Oxbow,” an 1835-36 oil painting showing deforestation on a mountainside and a bend of the Connecticut River.

The section also includes a handful of later works, such as “Study for ‘The Hunter’s Return’” (1845), a landscape of trees and mountains, with a small cabin nearly camouflaged in the lower right-hand corner. His aim was to show how humans could live in harmony with nature, says Dr. Kornhauser.

Cole died suddenly at age 47 of pleurisy and lung congestion. The last part of the exhibit, “Cole’s Legacy,” showcases works by his students, namely Church and Asher B. Durand.

The show highlights how they took a different perspective from Cole. For example, in Durand’s 1853 “Progress (The Advance of Civilization),” railroads and telegraph cables fit seamlessly into the landscape as smoke mingles with sun rays. Durand’s painting “celebrates without a hint of doubt the triumph of civilization over the wilderness,” Dr. Barringer writes in the catalog. He adds that Durand and Church absorbed Cole’s aesthetic lessons but embraced Manifest Destiny, the concept that settlers had a mission to expand across North America. It was a theory that “Cole abhorred.”



Asher Brown Durand’s ‘Progress (The Advance of Civilization)’ of 1853. PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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es the shape of a question mark, raises questions that still apply today. As Dr. Barringer writes, “Cole asks us: Will the ruinous fate of past empires befall modern America?”

Appeared in the January 13, 2018, print edition as ‘Thomas Cole, Repictured.’